

## Original article

# A study on the effects of growing up in a family with DV on children with a cross-cultural background: field research from a maternal and child living support facility

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Key words : child abuse, domestic violence, victim supports, child with a cross-cultural background

### Abstract

Research has shown that children growing up in a family with spousal domestic violence (DV) are susceptible to serious mental and physical effects. The effects of DV on children are even more complicated in a cross-cultural family in which a cultural hierarchy is superimposed on the batterer and victim brought about by the actual economic disparity in the international society, cultural relationships in Japanese society, and images circulated through mass media. The recent increase in mixed marriages between a Japanese man and a foreign woman is accompanied by a rapid increase in child DV victims. This study examines the current condition of these child DV victims growing up in a cross-cultural background, who are exposed to DV together with their foreign mother. The results showed that children with a cross-cultural background growing up in a family with DV are at greater risk of being victimized by both the batterer and the victim, and that they are seriously affected by their family environment. In addition to this direct harm, the effects of DV subconsciously influences children's social relationships through learning difficulties, an unstable sense of values and/or identity, and a destabilized mother-child relationship. It is shown that such indirect effects derived from the direct violence persist over time.

Therefore, multilateral long-term support that can keep track of each child's situation and help establish their identity and appreciation of diverse cultural backgrounds is essential.

### Introduction: background and purpose of the study

Despite a general decrease in the number of marriages in Japan, marriages between a foreigner and a Japanese person are increasing (Figure 1). According to the 2008 demographic survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, one in 20 newly married couples is between a foreigner and a Japanese person, of which 80% is between a Japanese man and a foreign woman. The majority of these foreign women come from Asia (Figure 2).

This trend is accompanied by an increasing number of victims of domestic violence (hereafter DV) carried out by a (former) spouse or partner among Asian women and Japanese men.

Previous research by the author has shown that DV to foreign women is distinct from that to Japanese women in that the batterer takes advantage of his legal and/or cultural status, and has recommended support suited to their particular situation [2-3]. The same line of research has revealed a growing number of children with a cross-cultural background raised

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(Number of marriages)

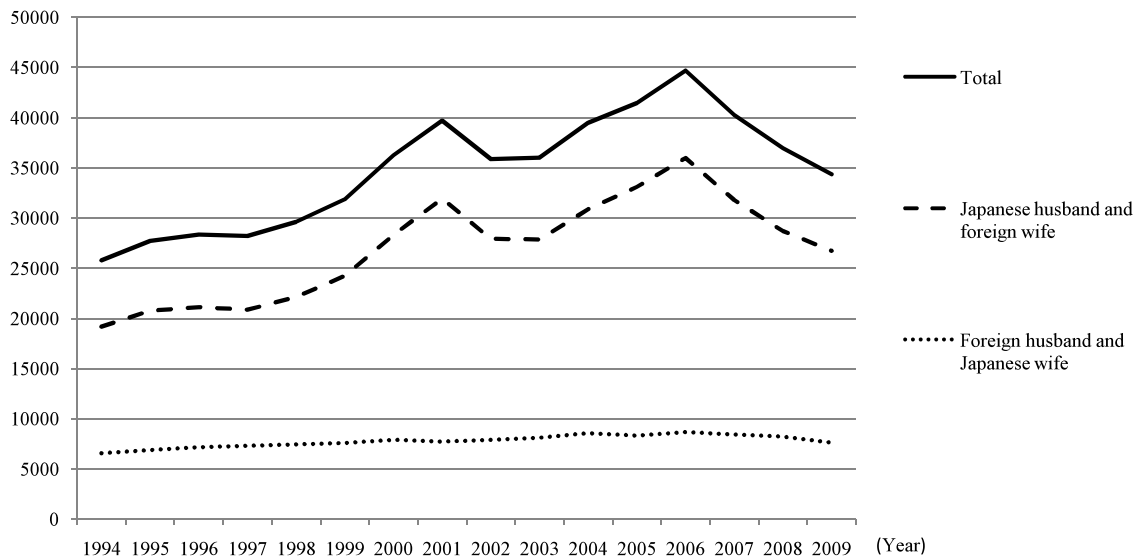


Figure 1. Marriage trends by year between a foreigner and a Japanese person.

Drafted by Terada based on *The Demographic Survey*, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [1]

(Number of marriages)

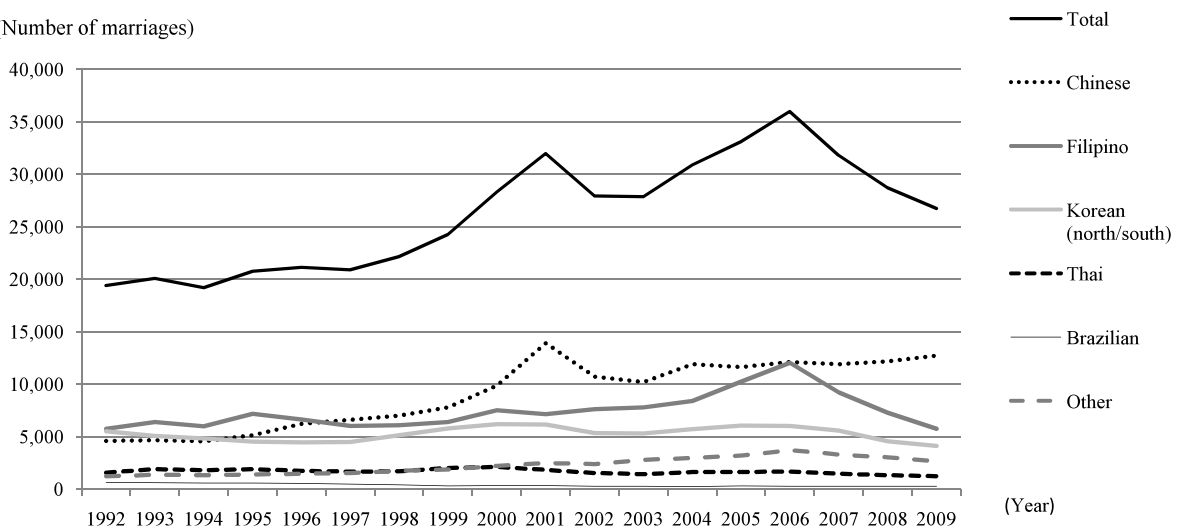


Figure 2. Annual marriage trend by the nationality of the foreign wife.

Source: same as Figure 1

in families with DV and a rapid increase of the children who take refuge in a shelter with their mother. Thus DV has serious effects not only on the primary victims, the mothers, but also on their children [4]. This study especially seeks to examine the effects of DV on children with a

cross-cultural background and to raise some future directions. Since the difficulties children of cross-cultural DV victims face is the same regardless of their nationality, children were collapsed over citizenship status and cultural background.<sup>1)</sup>

## Method and Subjects

### Method

This study surveys previous research on the effects of DV on children and examines the issues and support measures for children with a cross-cultural background based on the fieldwork conducted at a maternal and child living support facility (A) which actively engages in support for foreign DV victims. This fieldwork at facility A has been conducted over 10 years between 2002 and 2011.

The purpose of the current study is not to report the result of the fieldwork, but to examine the effects of DV on children with a cross-cultural background. Details of the support provided for mothers and children at facility A can be found elsewhere [2].

This fieldwork was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research of the Japanese Society for the Study of Social Welfare. This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Niigata University of Health and Welfare, and informed consent was obtained from each subject after a thorough explanation using written documents.

### Subjects: Overview of facility A

A maternal and child living support facility protects mothers and children and supports their independence. Article 38 of the *Child Welfare Act* stipulates its goal ‘to accommodate and protect single mothers and children under their care, to help their life, and also to provide an aftercare through counseling and other means’. Facility A, the fieldwork site for this study, is a private facility managed by a social welfare corporation, and provides sound upbringing for after-school children as well as temporary aid service.

Facility A is a relatively small-sized facility operated by five full-time (a director, a chief counselor and a counselor for mothers and children, a counselor for juveniles, and a nursery staff) and three part-time (two counselors for juveniles and a contract doctor) staff, with a capacity for nine families. It was established in 1991 as a private shelter aimed at protecting Asian mothers and their children. Specifically, these mothers were once married to a Japanese man and gave birth to a child, but lost their way in poverty due the husband’s violence and/or abandonment. In 1995, facility A became a shelter for mothers and children stipulated by *Child Welfare Act*, and began to accept mothers and children nationwide, keeping its original emphasis on support for foreign mothers and children. In 1998, with the revision of *Child Welfare Act*, its name was changed to Maternal and Child Living Support Facility.

As shown in table 1, by 2010, facility A has accommodated as much as 507 people or 169 families since it became a shelter for mothers and children in 1995. Although it accepts non-foreigners without any restriction on nationality, many foreigners tend to come to facility A from other facilities around the country, because of the limited number of facilities that actively accept foreigners.

Table 2 categorizes all 101 families and children in table 1 by nationality. Since facility A has Japanese staff fluent in English and Tagalog, as well as Filipino staff, Filipinos account a large proportion of intakes.

However, since facility A can by no means handle every language, the range of service it can provide is limited. Therefore, it copes with multi-national refugees through tight coordination with other support facilities.

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1) Morikawa points out the risk of the classification by nationality, claiming that it conceals the issues surrounding children who hold Japanese citizenship from a marriage between a Japanese and a foreigner [5]. Nakanishi also emphasizes the importance of understanding the diversity of children with various cultural backgrounds [6].

Table 1. Total numbers of families/people/children accommodated from 1995 to 2010.

	Family	Person	Child
Foreigner	133	330	197
Japanese	68	177	109
Total	201	507	306

Table 2. Numbers of foreign families and children accommodated from 1995 to 2010, sorted by nationality.

	Filipino	Vietnamese	Thai	Chinese	Other	Total
Family	100 (75%)	8 (6%)	7 (5%)	6 (5%)	12 (9%)	133
Child	154 (78%)	14 (7%)	6 (3%)	8 (4%)	15 (8%)	197

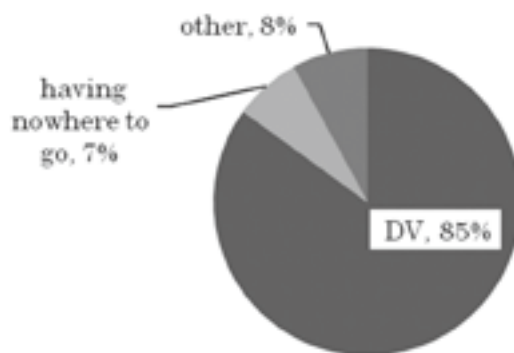


Figure 3. Reasons for foreign families to take refuge

As shown in figure 3, the main reason foreign families come to the shelter is DV, which vastly outnumbers the second most common reason - housing problems. However, the graph only reflects the mothers' principal reason, and in many cases there are multiple reasons in which DV may just be an immediate reason for taking refuge. Refugees have various issues, for example some have lost their home by escaping from DV and others are involved in debt due to DV.

## Result

### 1. Direct effect of being raised in a family with DV

'DV victim' usually denotes victims of violence by a person who is/was in a close

relationship, such as a spouse or a partner. DV, however, has been shown to be closely related to child abuse [7] and is recognized as such in the *Act on the Prevention, etc. of Child Abuse* by specifying 'spousal violence in a family with a child' as a form of child abuse.

The harmful effects of DV can be roughly classified into three categories; the harm from the parent batterer, the harm from the parent victim, and the effect from the familial environment. Each category is discussed in turn below.

#### 1) The harm from the parent batterer

Firstly, in a familial environment with a frequent violence, violence may be carried out not only between parents but also towards a child.

Thus, children raised in a family with DV may themselves be victimized by the batterer and have high risk of child abuse. Even though the batterer does not directly injure the victim, children detect messages in the batterer's behavior [8]. This may lead to indirect effects of DV, in which children recognize violence or abuse as a means for building human relationships and victimize the next generation, resulting in a generational chain of abuse [9].

## 2) The harm from the parent victim

Secondly, children may be victimized by the mother who herself is a victim of DV. Many cases have been reported where mothers, from the stress of being victimized, assault their children. Helplessness may also prevent mothers from establishing an emotional relationship with their children, leading to child neglect. Behavioral or mental problems in children, as well as in the mother, exacerbate as the psychological damage of the mother from DV becomes more serious [10-11]. This becomes an obstacle in fostering a sense of stability and trustfulness, a basis for child development, as well as a healthy emotional bonding; thus making the establishment of a stable parent-child relationship difficult [12].

## 3) The effect of growing up in a family with DV

Thirdly, the effects of growing up in a family with DV include frequently witnessing DV, and persistent exposure to the stress and pressure of imminent violence [13-14]. Children are thus forced to live under anxiety, helplessness, guilt and mental conflicts, which may surface as a physical and/or mental symptom and affect child development [15]. Children's personality, behavior, and sense of value are also affected. It has been reported that such children tend to have problems in human relationships - e.g. they recognize male-female relationships and familial relationships based on a dominance-submission relationship or have trouble with discussion and

negotiation due to a lack of trustfulness, as well as a lack of self-esteem [16-17].

## 2. Indirect effects derived from the direct effects of DV

As noted above, children growing up in a family with DV are at higher risk of child abuse from both the batterer and the DV victim, and are severely affected by their family environment. In addition to these direct effects, DV is associated with learning difficulties and can even subconsciously influence children's perception of acceptable social relationships. Such effects have been shown to persist over a long period of time. This section discusses the consequences of such indirect effects.

### 1) Learning difficulties

In terms of education, children of cross-cultural background affected by DV display learning difficulties. Since most information about education is provided in Japanese, it is difficult for foreign mothers uncomfortable with Japanese to obtain and understand this information [6]. It is also hard for children to acquire Japanese through daily conversations with their mother. As a result, they cannot learn enough of the material taught in class. Differences in the child's culture, manner and appearance may also induce bullying in Japanese schools that emphasize group behavior and homogeneity. Alienated from the Japanese educational atmosphere, some children lose confidence, denigrate their background, and blame their weaker parent in anguish.

In this respect, learning support from a third party such as volunteers becomes important. As discussed above, many of the children experience child abuse, which poses serious difficulties in learning. These children also tend to have an attachment disorder, having failed to build a healthy bonding relationship with their parents, which becomes an obstacle to fostering a good relationship with supporters. Forming a good

relationship with children, therefore, is essential in learning support. Good relationships with learning supporters such as facility staff or volunteers are regarded to be essential not only for study but also for a healthy development [18].

Moreover, it is necessary to ensure that children with a cross-cultural background acquire not only Japanese, but also their mother tongue. Respecting their mother tongue helps them to establish their identity, and is of great significance for the establishment of a positive and active sense of self [19]. However, there are few opportunities to learn their mother tongue. Foreign language classes organized by NGO, NPO, foreign self-help groups or parents provide such an educational environment. Public facilities, however, rarely provide such classes because they fail to understand its importance relative to Japanese education [20]. As we will see in the following section, problems in study and language exert serious effects not only on learning, but also on children's sense of value and identity.

## 2) Unstable sense of value and identity

As noted above, in the majority of DV cases involving children of a cross-cultural background, the Japanese father victimizes the foreign mother. Many children thus superimpose a cultural hierarchy over the relationship between the Japanese culture of the father, the stronger in the DV relationship, and the foreign culture of the weaker mother. Particularly in the cases where a mother comes from a developing country, children tend to espouse a negative image of the maternal culture, influenced by complex factors including the economic disparity in the international society, the social structure, and the images circulated through mass media. This tendency becomes more pronounced as children approach school age when they understand the importance of Japanese in school education. Moreover, as noted above, they suffer from a loss

of self-esteem through bullying induced by differences in their appearance and/or in culture, which may cause a serious identity crisis [22]. Children thus tend to foster a negative attitude toward their own culture through their exposure to DV in the family and/or the experiences in school, which reinforce their conceptualizations about cultural hierarchy.

Previous studies have pointed out, however, that the identity crisis children with a cross-cultural background face is in fact a general issue experienced by most foreign children, regardless of their experience with DV. For example, children from a different cultural background tend to feel conflicted between acquiring Japanese language and culture on the one hand, and adhering to their identity on the other. Alienated from the Japanese educational atmosphere, these children have difficulties in establishing a stable identity, self-confidence and self-esteem [20]. Moreover, the process of cultural transmission from the parent is affected by the authority of the transmitted language/culture and its political, sociological and economic power. Disparities in such authority has been reported to affect parental choice of language and children's language acquisition [22]. In addition, mothers themselves experience the same conflicting choices, resulting in difficulties teaching their language and culture. Thus, similar sorts of support for these mothers are called for [23].

Cultural transmission in children is largely affected by multiple factors, including school education and their surrounding social structure and international relationships. Therefore, the development of children growing up in a background of cross-cultural DV is hampered by persistent mental stress invoked from within and without the family, i.e. from the family hierarchy on the one hand, and from the cultural authority imposed by society on the other. Early instability in their identity tends to result in mental conflict in adolescence. To understand the effects of DV

on children, therefore, one must take into account transformations in their identity through the course of their development. For this reason, even after the critical period that immediately follows DV, long-term support is important in dealing with various lasting effects on behaviors, emotions, and human relationships.

### 3) Destabilization of the mother-child relationship

The formation of the value system described above poses a huge obstacle in repairing the disturbed mother-child relationship caused by DV. Children who witness DV and/or experience abuse have difficulties in establishing a trustful relationship with their parent. Moreover, since many foreign mothers are less comfortable in Japanese and have greater difficulties in adapting to Japanese society compared to their children, children tend to develop a further feeling of distrust against their mother, and in some cases even that of inferiority [18]. Children often espouse negative feelings about mother's culture and ethnicity, and denigrate their inherited cultural background. Even after escaping from DV, the mother's vulnerability both in the DV relationship and in social aspects including language and culture fosters the children's sense of distrust to their mother or extremely poor self-esteem, leading to a destabilization of the mother-child relationship. The problem is especially acute for mothers having difficulties with Japanese, for in such cases, verbal communication between the mother and the child may sometimes be difficult. Cultural breakdown between the mother and the child deprives the latter's opportunity to inherit the maternal culture. Combined with experiences of bullying in school due to differences in appearance and/or culture, this reinforces a negative or distorted image about the cultural background of their mother and of themselves.

That is, in addition to the disappointment directed to their mother, children's distrust is

further fueled by their discontent and condemnation of the mother's inability to adapt to Japanese society, which then becomes an obstacle in repairing the relationship. As a result, mother-child relationships tend to remain destabilized even after the child overcomes their distrustfulness and fear for others, and establishes reliable relationships with people such as school teachers and social workers. Although in general it has been reported that the mother-child relationship improve over time once they escape from DV unless interfered by the batterer [24], it is also pointed out that a close relationship with the mother is essential for children's recovery from mental traumas [25]. For children of a cross-cultural background, however, such mental damage is combined with cultural trauma. For this reason, recovery from DV and reparation to the familial relationship are by no means easy, and these effects persists over a long period of time, even after recovery from the direct damages of DV.

## Discussion

As we have seen above, growing up in a family with DV imposes diverse harm on children with a cross-cultural background; they have high risk of being abused by their parents, and are affected by the family environment. In addition to these direct effects, there are derived/indirect effects that have persistent and serious influence. Little attention, however, has been paid to these harmful effects of DV on children. As the *Act on the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims* (hereafter *DV prevention law*) stipulates, "The term 'victim(s)' as used in this Act means a person(s) who has been subjected to spousal violence". Thus, the *DV prevention law* requires respect for the human rights of foreign women of any nationality directly victimized by their spouse, such that their particular circumstance is well understood and considered today.

On the other hand, support for children

victimized by DV is insufficient - it is simply relegated to the individual efforts of schools, support institutions and the parties involved. Thus we need to re-examine the support system for children with a cross-cultural background. Rather than mere ex-post solutions for the problems which have arisen, long-term support is essential in understanding the situation of each child and to establish the strong identity that enables children to appreciate their own cross-cultural background. This requires the establishment of a multilateral support system adjustable to each developmental stage of the child through a cooperation of all the related organizations beyond direct supporters and organizations. It is also necessary to fix existing social handicaps by furnishing a social environment that can accommodate children. The necessity of improving support for foreigners through social work adapted to clients with a cross-cultural background (cross-cultural or multi-cultural social work) has already been discussed [26-27]. We also need to build, based on the knowledge and techniques from this social work, a support system for children that pays close attention to diverse cultural backgrounds and family environments. Detailed analyses of the children's trauma, the temporal transformation of these issues, as well as a concrete examination of the support measures are left for future studies.

The current study, however, is limited in some respects. For example, by its institutional nature, most of the clients from the maternal and child living support facility that are the focus of in this study are foreign mothers and their children victimized by a Japanese man, thereby introducing a bias in the sample. Nevertheless, given that there are few domestic studies on social work regarding support for DV victims since most studies on foreign mothers and children victimized in DV are reports on urgent temporary protection or policy researches, I think it is meaningful to examine an effective support measure through the analysis of the actual

practice in the facility that engages in social work for victimized foreign mothers and children.

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